

A gift from our Father: How we met Hiroshi Suzuki and learned of his life work in Japan

By Dr. Mary L. Kiper Dubler, DVM

The most riveting story I found among Aunt Jane's papers was that of the first Japanese person she led to the Lord. Her letter to supporters back home, dated November 18, 1950 began, *Today is one of the happiest days I have lived!*

The story began three weeks prior when she, a woman named Adelaide and two Japanese girls had started to go to the hospital to visit one of her fellow missionaries with a new baby. In the push and shove of everyone trying to get into the train, Sarah Jane was separated from her companions and left behind at the station. Since she did not know how to get to the hospital, she decided to return home. When she arrived she discovered she had no keys to the house, so she sat on the front steps waiting for her friends to return. She wrote,

Some of the people passing by just looked out of the corner of their eyes at me, but one high school lad stopped by and said, 'Do you have any free time to practice



Sarah Jane Kiper in
Yamagata, Japan, c. 1954

English conversation with me?' Free time? What else did I have to do? We talked for an hour or more, and most of the time I was answering questions about how Americans do things differently from the Japanese. Then when I noticed that I had only about fifteen minutes left, I asked him if he had ever gone to a Christian church. He said, 'Yes, but I can't believe what the pastor said. A few years ago both my father and mother died, and I became very bitter toward God and everybody. It is hard for me to believe that there is a God. I have determined to do the best I can in the world by myself, but my heart is very vacant.' I said, 'Have you ever thought that maybe if you believed in God that He could fill your vacant heart?' I only had time left to read to him John

3:16, tell him to read the book of John, and invite him to come back with any questions he might have.

The lad's name was Hiroshi Suzuki, and he came the following Saturday and talked with Gladys, Sarah Jane's housemate, and then the next Saturday he returned with other questions. Sarah Jane spent all afternoon with him, explaining the way of salvation. She commented in her letter that she sensed he was still questioning the existence of God, so she did not urge him to become a Christian that day. She prayed for him, though, and told him she would continue to pray that God would cause him to believe. He returned on November 18th. This story continues best in Sarah Jane's words:

Today Suzuki-san returned again. A book I had given him to read was very helpful. Today he said, 'Although I was bitter toward God, I now believe in God, and what this book said made me feel very sinful.' After explaining again the verse, 'If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...', he said, 'Yes, I want to confess my sins, but how do I do it?' When I told him how, he prayed, 'God, I believe what the Bible says. Please take my sin from my heart.' I could understand that much of his prayer in Japanese. Just before he went home he said, 'I am afraid my will is not strong enough to do all that Jesus wants me to do all the time.' I explained how God would give him power to live the Christian life, but like all new 'babes in Christ,' Suzuki-san needs our prayers that he may grow to be a strong witness for Christ here.

Suzuki-san is the first person in Japan I have been used of the Lord to win to Christ. That is why this is one of the happiest days of my life.

As I found out through further reading through Aunt Jane's papers, God indeed answered her prayers that Hiroshi Suzuki would be a strong witness for Christ in Japan. He ultimately became a Baptist pastor.

When I learned he had become a pastor, I marveled at the way God multiplies His harvest. Even if Hiroshi Suzuki had been the only person my aunt had led to the Lord, he most certainly had led many of his countrymen to Christ. I began to wonder if I could possibly locate Pastor Suzuki. I thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to contact this man that was such an important part of my aunt's life?"

One of the last mentions of Hiroshi Suzuki in Sarah Jane's papers was in a Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society publication that included an article about Pastor Suzuki's four month visit to the States in 1965. My aunt saw him during that trip, and he even came to my home town of Chenoa, Illinois. I was astounded to realize that I may have met him then, but since I was only five years old at the time, I have no recollection of his visit. The mission society article mentioned that Pastor Suzuki was from Tendo, Yamagata Prefecture, Japan. [Flier at right shows Pastor Hiroshi Suzuki and Sarah Jane Kiper meeting in the States.]

How to find someone who had lived in a city in Japan over 30 years ago? I did what many people do today; I got on the Internet. I used a search engine to look

The newsletter is titled "Conservative Baptist FOREIGN MISSION SOCIETY". It is dated "January, 1965" and includes the address "P. O. Box 5, Wheaton, Illinois 60188" and a price of "60 cents per year".

At the top left, there are two small boxes: "Life with Mark-Waris page 3" and "The Pillow Case Mystery page 5".

The main article is titled "A National Christian Looks at Missions". The text discusses the state of the Christian church in Japan, mentioning that Suzuki's new and popular religious emphasis physical healing, riches, and a "pleasant" life. It notes that the biggest weakness of Christian churches in Japan is a lack of loyalty to the Lord, and that materialism makes them compromise with the world, making Christians reluctant to witness for Christ.

Another section mentions that Suzuki is a Japanese pastor converted through CPFBMS missionaries, recently visited the United States, and shared his views on missionary work and materialism.

The article also discusses the challenges of starting a church in the southern cities, noting that the common family structure revolves about Buddhist ceremonies handed down through the centuries. It mentions that the Buddhist altar in the home ties the family to its ancestors, and that the Buddhist temple ties a community together. Every town has an annual Buddhist festival in which everyone takes part. Every home is decorated for the occasion; everyone contributes money for the big day. The Christian who returns is ostracized from his home.

At the bottom of the article, there is a photograph showing Pastor Hiroshi Suzuki and Sarah Jane Kiper sitting together and talking. The caption reads: "Pastor Hiroshi Suzuki discussed his experiences with Sarah Jane Kiper, former missionary who was instrumental in his conversion, and her. See'y Edwin Jensen."

Conservative Baptist Missionary newsletter showing Heroshi Suzuki (center) and Sarah Jane Kiper, January 1965.

for the word Tendo, and was delighted to find that the city had a web site that was in simple, but understandable, English. The webmaster for the site had his e-mail address available, so I sent him a note explaining who I was and that I was trying find out if Pastor Hiroshi Suzuki was still at the Bible Baptist Church in Tendo. After I sent the e-mail I was eagerly waiting for his reply and praying that God would use this man to help me find Pastor Suzuki.

Soon he wrote me this note:

This is Tetsuya Takahashi, webmaster of Tourism Guide in Tendo. I am sorry to send e-mail you late. I went to the Bible Baptist Church in Tendo today. They knew Reverend Hiroshi Suzuki and they said that he has already left. I heard that he lives in Saitama Prefecture next to Tokyo. They promised to send me his present address. I will send e-mail you as soon as I can.

I was astounded that this kind man had actually gone to the church to make inquiry about Hiroshi Suzuki. I hoped that the church in Tendo would indeed be able to furnish his current address, and I was not disappointed. Six days later I received another e-mail from the webmaster giving me what was said to be Hiroshi Suzuki's address. He also indicated that the church people had told him that Pastor Suzuki had retired and was serving as a volunteer at many churches.



I was elated that I may have located Suzuki-san, and praised the Lord for helping me to find him so quickly and easily. Finding him at last was truly a gift from our Father. On November 24, 1998, almost 48 years to the day since he had been led to the Lord by my Aunt Jane, I sent a letter to Hiroshi Suzuki. I enclosed a picture of my aunt so that he would see that what I said was legitimate. I also told him,

I am a niece of Sarah Jane Kiper who was a missionary to Japan from 1950 to 1955. She died when I was 15 years old, and although I remember her I really did not know much of her history, particularly about her time in Japan. I recently requested some information from Sarah Jane's sister about Aunt Sarah Jane, and I was blessed to read about her friendship with you and how she led you to the Lord, and that you were her first convert in Japan. God certainly has multiplied His harvest by leading you to become a pastor and hopefully influencing many of your countrymen for Christ.

I ended my letter by mentioning how I had gotten his address, and saying that I hoped he did not mind my contacting him. After I mailed the letter, I wondered how long it would take to get a response. I felt certain he would respond, because I sensed that the Lord wanted me to be able to hear from him.

Suzuki-san's answer came shortly before Christmas 1998. When I saw the colorful stamps from Japan I was so excited. My hands trembled slightly as I opened the letter, and I saw it was

written in a neat fashion in wonderful English. I read the letter aloud to John, and what I read made me cry with tears of joy.

Your letter was a big surprise and gave me a great joy! It was completely an unexpected letter, so that it made me so happy! Since Sarah Jane left from Japan, finishing her first term of missionary work, she wrote me many times. Every time of my birthday she sent me a present with a letter, writing 'Dear my son in the Lord.' So many unforgettable memories about her I have! Even now, I think of her and I miss the time which I spent with her in Japan and the time when I visited her in the States.

How I met her, it is a mysterious story. No, not mysterious, but it is God who set all the things for both of us to meet on that day! If she had got in the train, if she had have the direction to the hospital which she wanted to go, if she have had the key of her house with her, if my high school had not been nearby her house, if I had not passed by at that time, on that day, there would have no chance to meet. Later, she gave me her prayer letter which she told how she met me on that day.

I visited your country from August of 1965 to December in same year after ten years since she left Japan. I clearly remember that my bus coming near to Chicago from Denver, I cried, 'Is it real or a dream that I will meet Sarah Jane again in few hours? The Lord is so mercy and greatful (sic) that He gave us such a wonderful chance to meet together!' How happy time of reunion at the bus station! She was so exciting that she couldn't drive her car well and I wondered if she might cause a car accident. It was on Nov. 1 of '65. On Nov. 6 I visited her home town in Chenoa and stayed at her parent's home. During those days I visited her home church, Springfield the state capitol, New Salem with her parents and her niece Brenda. The time of the reunion was one of the happiest time in all my life! Such a great joy, love filled with God's grace among us, I felt as if the Heaven had come down to us!

She put me into the train to Denver at the Chicago station on Nov. 8. I have never forgotten her face with full love and a kind of sadness, when she saw me off at the platform.

Since she has gone, even now I think of her, 'my spiritual mother' many times, and I got a letter from you who knows Sarah Jane well as a niece. It made me very happy.

I have worked for 40 years as a pastor of three churches, one was for 15 years, one for 12 years, the last for 13 years. First two churches belong to Conservative Baptist in Tendo and Yamagata, the third one Evangelical Free Church in Kyoto. Two years ago I



Sarah Jane Kiper
c. 1973

retired, because of my son's disease. He is single and 36 years old. He got sick four years ago which is called 'Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis' usually called ALS. It is very difficult disease no way to be cured. He can't walk, can't move his arms and hands. He stay with us. Since I retired we live together with my daughter's family which have three children. So we have a big family, 8 members. All of us are looking forward to your coming on May next year. May you have a very merry Christmas.



Pastor Hiroshi Suzuki and his wife Mieko in 2000

He also included some photographs, one of him and his wife, and two showing the people and church building where he last served as pastor. When I looked at his face in the photograph, it made me even more eager to meet him, his wife and family. What a joy it was to read his letter and understand how much my Aunt Jane meant to this man. We were blessed in April of 2000 to be able to travel to Japan and meet Hiroshi, his wife Mieko, and his family. Hiroshi and his wife as well as their daughter Nozomi visited us for three weeks in September, 2007. Hiroshi preached three Sundays at Good Shepherd Bible Chapel in Fort Collins, Colorado.